

Have you ever been part of a group that was working together when you didn't even know other people's names? That makes for hard work! Sometimes activities are planned at the beginning of meetings to help members get to know each other better. This is called "community building" or "group building" and it helps people feel comfortable with one another, be glad to be there and be ready and open to participate fully in the group.

History and Background

The gathered group is a central part of the experience of faith. The Bible tells of communities and groups, gathered to worship and work together.

Group building is based on two ideas. (1) Every group, however large or small, formal or informal, needs to develop or renew a sense of community if it is to work sensitively and effectively. (2) Activities that will enhance the group's sense of community can be intentionally planned. Community building may be telling names, meeting informally over coffee and cookies, participating in ice-breakers or get-acquainted games, or sharing information about history or expectations. All these do what a host would do at home when people gather—help people get to know one another. But group building goes one step further, for it helps people feel they are part of the whole group so that they can trust one another and participate as group members rather

than just as individuals. If the planned group building works, group building will continue throughout the time together.

Common Practices

In many groups an attempt at group building is made by the leader asking each person to "tell your name and where you are from or what you do." Some churches set aside time at the beginning of each meeting for people to tell something of their life since the group was last together. Some churches have retreats at the beginning of the church year for the officers and leaders of the church to be together and learn to trust one another, as well as to do some planning for the year. Sometimes the group building is combined with worship, devotions or Bible study. Many churches assume that group building isn't necessary because "everybody knows everybody else." Rarely is that true, even for long-term church members. And deepening our relationships is part of our purpose in the church.

Sometimes the activities planned relate to the purpose of the meeting, so a group meeting to talk about the church visitation might talk about "the first time a member of this church visited me" or the music committee might begin a meeting by talking about "what I like best about our music program." Often when the group is large, people talk in small groups to two or three other people, so that everyone has an opportunity to be heard.

Responsibilities

If you want to strengthen your group through group building, there are several things to do, including:

- Planning time for group building at the beginning of each meeting or event. Generally, group building for long meetings and large groups takes more time than for short meetings or small groups.
- Considering activities that are fun, those that allow participants to share helpful information about themselves and activities that help people work together.
- Understanding what the group needs. For ongoing groups, this will mean knowing what has happened in the past.
- Giving clear instructions. If the activity involves several steps, outline carefully or describe the steps one at a time.
- Encouraging everyone to participate but not forcing anyone.
- Making sure everyone knows everyone else's name. If there is any question, provide nametags or an opportunity for making nametags.
- Being inclusive. Use inclusive language and plan activities in which everyone can participate. Take into account the physical condition of each participant.
- Devising ways for everyone to speak. This may mean dividing into groups of two to eight when the group is larger.
- Planning some activities that aren't all talk. Craft activities such as making nametags or collages or role-

playing activities such as acting out a situation, emotion or Bible passage are also group-building activities.

- Providing all supplies. Paper, pencils, newsprint, markers, tape, scissors, refreshments, nametags, movable chairs and songbooks all could be group-building supplies.
- Being certain there is enough room to do what you plan. It takes more room to talk together than to sit and listen to one person. You'll need to allow space between smaller groups so everyone can hear.

Skills and Attributes Needed

- Tact.
- Friendliness.
- Interest in and concern for all people.
- Ability to listen.
- Ability to cooperate with a number of people.
- Sensitivity to people's needs.
- Self-awareness and understanding.
- Knowledge of what make groups work.
- Willingness to try new things.

Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Use **Serendipity Books** (Waco, TX: Creative Resources/Word, Inc.), which have getting-acquainted activities.

- Use materials on human resource development from Pfeiffer & Company (8517 Production Avenue, San Diego, CA 92121. Telephone 619-578-5900).
- Introduce a simple form of group building in your next meeting without identifying it.
- Meet with others who plan programs and meetings to see what they have tried or to discuss things you all could try.
- A song that makes me think of spring.
- Provide craft materials and ask each person to make a nametag, using a favorite color. One way to break the larger group into small groups would be to ask all people to get together with others who chose the same color. Some adjustments might be needed for equalizing the size of groups.

Examples of Group Building

- Sing familiar songs or teach new songs, especially rounds or ones with hand motions.
- Ask each person to reflect and share:
 - An early memory of family, the church or school.
 - A favorite food, book or television program.
 - A song that best describes me.
 - Two people who have influenced my life.
 - A present concern.
 - The most satisfying thing in my life at this time.
 - Something I hope will happen at this meeting.
- Use a question that has to do with the current season, or an upcoming church event, and ask questions related to it that are similar to those above. For example:
 - An early memory of returning to school
 - A favorite Christmas tradition, current or past.

Questions

- What kind of group-building activities are ones you have experienced or led?
- If you do not have planned group-building activities now, what are three that you think you could introduce to your group?
- What is a kind of group-building activity you have not experienced that you would like to try? Where do you think you could do it?
- What groups at your church use group building regularly? What difference does it make?
- Sharing in groups requires trust. How can you assure that the group sharing activities you use can be approached at a comfortable level for all participants?